SAINTS, SINNERS AND THE GATES OF HELL
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Psalm 34:1-10
Matthew 16:13-18
I Peter 2:9-10

". . . . on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" Matthew 16:18

"You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades — or Hell — will not prevail against it." Peter and his brother Andrew, James and John — sons of the fisherman Zebedee, Simon, another James, Thaddeus and Bartholomew about whom we don't know much, Matthew the tax collector, Philip — one of Peter's neighbors, Thomas the doubter and Judas Iscariot who betrayed him.

That is how it all began, with that group of men — and women, too: Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Joanna.

Saints — because they were there. They knew him, knew his voice, what he looked like, his eyes piercing, what his hand felt like when it clasped their own, Saints because one by one, in one way or another, they lived out the rest of their lives on earth trying to do what he asked them to do: teaching, healing, welcoming, loving the world with his love. And each of them, in one way or another, died for him, even Judas who of all of them never quite understood what he was about nor how unconditionally he loved them, even him — Judas in his despicable betrayal.

Saints, but sinners too: men and women just like you and me. Frederick Buechner writes: "Jesus made his church out of human beings with more or less the same mixtures in them of cowardice and guts, of intelligence and stupidity, of selfishness and generosity, of openness of heart and sheer cussedness as you would be apt to find in any of us . . . ."

"The reason he made his church out of human beings," Buechner observes,"is that human beings were all there was to make it out of. In fact, as far as I know, human beings are all there is to make it out of still. It's a point worth remembering" (*Secrets in the Dark,* p. 147).

So the story begins with a group of ordinary human beings who hear Jesus invite them to follow him and do it: Follow him, listen to him, for

better or worse cast their lot with him, and do their best to obey him. He uses a new word to describe them: “ecclesia” in Greek, which means “called out” and which we translate “church.” In one of only two passages in the gospels where he uses the word he says he will build it — the ecclesia — on Peter, whose name in Greek is very close to the word for “rock.” It’s a pun: on this Petra —Peter, the rock— I will build my ecclesia and nothing shall ever finally destroy or overcome or prevail against it, not even powerful opposition, not even official persecution, not even intellectual attack, not even post-modern indifference. The gates of hell will not prevail against it.

One ecclesiastical tradition takes the words literally and believes that real earthly authority and power were given to Peter, that he was and is the foundation rock of the church and that his successors continue to sit on his throne in the great basilica in Rome that bears his name. Another tradition takes the words less literally and suggests that the foundation rock of the church was Peter’s faith and courage, but not Peter, literally, who after all didn’t seem to understand any better than the rest of them and, indeed, a few years later would deny that he ever knew Jesus. And yet, as modestly and humanly as it all began, it continues still, 2,000 years later in an amazing kaleidoscope of shapes and forms and colors and styles, in every land, every race, every culture, from the magnificence of St. Peter’s Square in Rome to the humblest storefront church on the South Side, from York Minster to a house church in Beijing — the church which clearly must have something going for it in addition to the human beings who constitute it and live in it and lead it and fight about it. The Church of Jesus Christ: Saints, Sinners and the Gates of Hell.

It’s Reformation Sunday, for years the day the preacher told the people why they weren’t Catholics and for good measure got in a few licks at Rome. Today, a different time, a time when Protestants and Catholics know they have far, far more in common than our ancestors knew, and that we are all in this together. Reformation Sunday is an occasion to think about church and our branch of it, our family. 489 years ago, October 31, 1517, a priest of the church, an Augustinian monk who taught theology at the University of Wittenberg, in Germany, wrote 95 theses on the nature of the church including some ideas he had for reforming it, and nailed the list to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg. The church door was the equivalent of the modern day talk show or Letters to the Editor column in the newspaper. It was the way you advanced your ideas in order to start a public conversation. The monk’s name was Martin Luther and the last thing he had in mind was a new church. He wanted to start a conversation about some practices in the church of the day, with a view toward their reformation.

Luther, Martin Marty says, was “a wrestler with God.” What Luther wanted was peace of mind, some sense that he was right with God, that his eternal salvation was secure and his life now, in some way pleasing and acceptable to God, not unlike what most of us want, I suspect. Luther was brilliant, stubborn, given to outbursts of earthy language, and utterly, fanatically devoted to doing whatever the church told him to do to win his salvation and achieve the peace of mind he so desperately wanted and which kept eluding him.

Studying scripture Luther came to one of the great intellectual and spiritual discoveries of all time. God’s love is a gift. It was there in creation. It was given in Jesus Christ. It is given to us over and over again in our daily lives. You can’t earn it or win it. You can only receive it in gratitude and joy and then live life in the glorious freedom of God’s love. Now, please understand that this issue — the official name of which is “Justification by Grace through Faith,” and which used to be the theological fault line between Protestants and Catholics — no longer divides us. We all agree — Catholics and Protestants — God’s love is freely given. God’s grace is amazing. You can’t earn it. But at the time, it was interpreted by the Church — all the way up to the throne of St. Peter, as a threat to the whole structure. If God’s love is freely given what reason would there be for people to submit to the authority of the church? And because it was the Middle Ages, long before anyone thought about the separation of church and state, it became a political threat. If the Church loses its authority over people’s lives, the prince will surely be next and then who knows what will happen?

Making a long and very good story short, Luther lost the argument, was excommunicated, branded a heretic, hauled into court at the Diet of Worms, commanded by the Holy Roman Emperor to recant. He refused — “Here I stand” he said, “I can do no other” and with those words became an outlaw, an enemy of the state with a price on his head and the threat of death.
Friends arranged for his escape and he was taken to the great gray castle at Wartburg for safe keeping. There he continued to study, translate scripture into German, also a crime, write letters, stir up trouble. And he wrote a hymn — certainly suggested by the fortress in which he was hiding in exile. “A Mighty Fortress is Our God, a bulwark never failing.”

Reformation Sunday — a time to sing the hymn, which by the way, is widely sung in Roman Catholic churches these days — a time to get out the Buchanan plaid stole and bring in the bagpipes to remind us of our own Presbyterian heritage in the Scottish Reformation that happened a few decades later.

The lasting importance of the Protestant Reformation is in the principles it embodied: particularly the importance of the human conscience, the precious and fragile freedom in which individual conscience can be exercised, the holding all authority, all power — ecclesiastical and political — up for examination and reform. In a *New York Times* review last Sunday of a new book about the faith, and skepticism, of the Founding Fathers, George Will wrote: "Protestantism's emphasis on the individual's direct, unmediated relationship with God, and the primacy of individual conscience and choice subverted conventions of hierarchical society" (10/22/06).

Our own Presbyterian part of the story began a few decades after Luther, in Geneva. A brilliant French lawyer, John Calvin, sided with the Reformation in France, was exiled and ended up in Geneva, where he created a new way of being the church, based on the rights of the individual and along the way created a revolutionary new form of political authority: God has given individuals the right to exercise responsibility for their own governance, Calvin said. That authority is given to individuals, not to monarchs or church leaders, to exercise over people. People, ordinary people, have it already, given to them by God and they, in turn, have the right to decide who will be their clergy — and their magistrates. John Calvin's 16th century Geneva showed the world a new political idea — democracy.

As I thought about this sermon I remembered the day I discovered the connection. It was a college course in Political Science. The text was *Great Political Thinkers*. I still have it. I looked it up. There he is in a collection of writers who shaped the way the modern world thinks and the political institutions it has developed to govern it best: Plato, Aristotle, Jeremy Bentham,
John Stuart Mill, Hobbes and Locke — and John Calvin. The book is not overly impressed with Geneva. Calvin was a man of his age and consented once to the burning of a heretic. But he did articulate the revolutionary idea that because the creator God is sovereign, so is the human conscience. And furthermore, that ordinary people have the God-given authority to choose the ones who will govern the church — not the Bishops — but the people who would elect Elders to govern with pastors, who also were elected by the people. It wasn't long before Geneva itself was being governed by elected Magistrates. The world hadn't seen anything like it for a very long time. Refugees from religious and political persecution flooded to Geneva from all over the world.

Calvin's ideas about governance were taken back to the Netherlands, Germany, Eastern Europe and to Britain by a Scottish exile John Knox. Today Reformed-Presbyterian Churches are still strong in those countries.

The majority of early settlers in North America were either Presbyterians or some other form of Calvinism. They worked hard, valued public education — which was one of Calvin's innovations in Geneva — if people were responsible for their governance, and if they freely participated in the worship of God, they would have to learn to read. Colonial Presbyterians resisted ecclesiastical and political top-down authority and were not fond of monarchy in general. When political revolution loomed they supported it so robustly that William Pitt, in Parliament, referred to the War for Independence in 1776 as "that Presbyterian revolt."

After the War the States collaborated on a Constitution guaranteeing the sacred rights of individuals, checks and balances to protect citizens from the abuse of power, and the freedom from state supported or enforced religion. The Constitution of the United States, Martin Marty says, is a Calvinist document.

Presbyterians, concentrated in the middle colonies and North Carolina, along with their theological cousins in New England — the Puritans, started most of the institutions of higher learning in colonial times and after independence. As the frontier pushed west over the Alleghenies, Presbyterian churches were organized, often with a pastor from Scotland or Northern Ireland, with a school house next door, the Presbyterian minister serving as pastor and school master.

It is a history of which we can be proud and for which we should be grateful. And, I deeply believe, it is a way of being Christian that is critical today, as never before.

These are difficult times for the Presbyterian Church. For one thing we have been losing members — for decades. There are enormous changes in the way people think about and practice religion. Traditional churches are not faring well. We are not fundamentalist or literalist about scripture, we lean toward freedom of conscience and not the moral certainty which translates into state mandated morality — on the hot button issues of the day. We are inclined to trust and try to protect the individual conscience. And, we are dissenters frequently in the current ideologically driven social and political climate.

When Congress passes and the President signs The Military Commissions Act of 2006, legalizing torture, suspending Habeas Corpus — the basic human right not to be incarcerated indefinitely without a public, open judicial process, you can count on Presbyterians to dissent. After all — that is why we came here in the first place. That is why people continue to want to come here — individual liberty. That is so fundamental to this experiment in republican democracy.

And because we value God's sovereignty and the sovereignty of the human conscience, which leads faithful people to different conclusions, we are inclined to argue with one another — a lot. For decades we Presbyterians have been fighting publicly about sex: what the Bible says or doesn't say: what is moral and what is not and who gets to decide. The issue for our time is gender orientation, homosexuality . . . . in the news in one way or another every day. The church's issue is ordination. The church decided ten years ago that homosexual practice is always wrong, and then ten years ago wrote it into our Constitution, wrong enough that practicing homosexual persons should not be ordained as church Elders, Deacons, or Ministers. Many in the Presbyterian Church disagree — profoundly, not out of a sense of political correctness but, sincerely, faithfully on the basis of scripture, and Jesus' own spirit of non-judgmental hospitality to those who were outside the social and moral conventions of the day. And so, after decades of bitter arguing and fighting, the last General Assembly decided that when it comes to this difficult issue, local church Sessions and Presbyteries can decide that this matter is not essential to our faith and, as such, need not be a barrier to ordination. Some are very happy with that decision. Some are very unhappy. So unhappy, in fact, that they are saying — we can't stay in a church like that. A few congregations are trying to leave — and to take their property with them. Some are in court. Some are planning to go to court.

It is not pretty. It is, in fact, a tragedy. But there is also a Presbyterian resilience, refined over nearly 500 years. And there are many, many Presbyterian congregations, 11,000 of them, most of them not torn apart by this or any particular issue — honoring the diversity which is the result of respecting individual conscience, doing their very best to be faithful to Jesus Christ and his Kingdom in the midst of difficult and complicated times.

The Presbyterian way is not the only way of being the church. But it is one good way: one important way and on this Reformation Sunday when we think a little about it, I invite you to consider it seriously, to thank God for what it has meant to the world, to our nation, and to pray for its faithfulness . . . . in God's unfolding future. And I need, I confess, on this day, the promise of Jesus, that whatever happens to a particular church, the whole big enterprise is in very good hands — because even the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

I loved something Barbara Brown Taylor wrote about the Church. A gifted pastor and preacher, an Episcopal priest, Barbara has recently left the Parish to teach, but like all of us privileged to do this work she sees the Church in all its glory and all its human fallibility; sees the church universal, triumphant, and also the church small, personal, intimate. She writes:

“In years to come, when people would ask me what I missed about parish ministry, baptisms and funerals would be high on the list — that, and the children who hung on my legs after the service was over, clinging to my knees while I shook their parents’ hands at the door. Because they were not old enough to serve on committees or wrangle over the service of worship, (or argue about ordination) the children often had a better grasp of what church was all about than the rest of us did. When one four year old rode by the church with his mother and an out-of-town friend, he interrupted them by tapping at the window. ‘That,’ he announced to the friend, ‘is where God gives us the bread’” (*Leaving Church)*.

Thanks be to God.